



Education as a civic right: Using schools to challenge the civic empowerment gap

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Perspectives on Critically Engaged Teaching and Race

In this series of related articles we present several alternatives to test-driven urban education "reforms"—alternatives that actively involve students in a critical analysis of their socially constructed environments, engaged discussions of race, and self-actualization. These essays hearken back to Twentieth Century theories of "critical pedagogy" championed by writers such as Paulo Freire and Bell Hooks. — the editors

Education as a Civic Right: Using Schools to Challenge the Civic Empowerment Gap

by Meira Levinson

Each semester I taught eighth-grade "Civics in Action" in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), students were required to take a standardized End-of-Course Assessment. One question asked them to select an issue "of importance to your school, your community, the country, the world and you." Students were instructed to present the issue as a question, then answer the question from two different perspectives, offering at least three reasons in favor of each perspective. Finally, they were required to write

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an essay in favor of one of the positions they identified, supporting their thesis with evidence, details, and "a strong conclusion." In June 2005, one of my students, whom I'll call Jacquari (not his real name), submitted the following thoughtful and provocative response, which I have reproduced verbatim so as not to sugarcoat the challenges he faced in formal academic proficiency.

Should boston build parks to reduces violence?

Yes they should build parks to reduces violence

No they shouldn't build parks to reduces violence

One reason why they should is to keep the peace the second reason is to have a place for children and the third reason is to have a place were we can run free.

1 reason why they shouldn't is because their will be shoot outs. 2 reason is because people will be smoking and drinking in the park leaving trash behind them 3 reason is because gangs

will be hanging out let [late] in the playground and be distroying it with spray paint.

I really think they should be then again they shouldn't because when there are different gangs contacts the fight always be in parks and suppose that there are a hole bunch of little kids in the park and then there are a group of gang members standing or chilling their then they enemies

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come over and start shouting at the others then some one lose they kid over some one else for nothing. Example when the girl was trying to leave the park in grove hall [a local housing development] because of a gang then as she was walking out the park she got shoot in the back and died.

Jacquari's essay is hardly alarmist. In the first six months of 2005, twenty-four people had been murdered in Boston, including six teenagers. Many of these murders had taken place in or near Jacquari's own poverty-stricken and racially isolated neighborhood of Dorchester.

My family and I live in Boston as well, in the rapidly gentrifying and increasingly White Jamaica Plain neighborhood. (Whole Foods moved in last year.) Jacquari and I are governed by the same mayor and city council. Our neighborhoods even border the same park, the largest in the city. But Jacquari's civic spaces are fraught with fear, as mine are not. When Jacquari passes an open space, he sees room for turf wars between rival gangs. When I pass an open space, I see room for a Frisbee game or a picnic. In this respect, Jacquari's city is not the same as my city. I don't see what he sees; I don't live as he lives; and no matter how imaginatively I try to understand the world from others'

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perspectives, my insights will never match his own.

Despite the fact that Jacquari likely never graduated from high school—he probably never made it past freshman year, given his abysmal academic skills and history of retention—Boston would be a better place if Jacquari were involved in its governance. Dorchester would be better off if Jacquari had the knowledge, skills and commitment to work with others to address the problems he identifies in his essay, as well as the many other civic challenges he told me about when he was my stu-

The civic empowerment gap is perhaps most visible in election data.

dent. Jacquari himself would be better off if he could translate his anguish into action—especially into civic action in collaboration with others who also want kids to be able to “run free” in a park rather than watch for a gun at their backs. Furthermore, Jacquari would be better off if he could have translated his knowledge of his own academic weaknesses into empowered engagement, into a declaration that his own education was outrageous and unjust. Jacquari deserved a real education, one where a fifteen year-old eighth-grader would have had the capacity to write flowing, compelling prose with a mastery of capitalization, spelling, grammar and mechanics. He also deserved an education that would enable him to exercise self-determination: individually, over his own life, and collectively, in collaboration with others, over the life of his community.

Because of Jacquari, and many other students I taught over eight years in the Atlanta and Boston Public Schools prior to my becoming an education professor, I have been committed in recent years to publicizing and trying to combat the *civic empowerment gap* between low-income youth and adults of color, on the one hand, and White, middle-class and wealthy youth and adults, on the other. This gap is as large and as disturbing as the

academic achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years. It harms students and their families, the communities in which they live, and the nation as a whole. But although we've had incontrovertible evidence of the civic empowerment gap for decades, we have done little to address it, even in the racially and economically segregated schools where so many young people at the bottom of the gap spend their time. By reforming our civically *miseducative* practices in these schools, I suggest we can not only contribute to the empowerment of a new generation, but also strengthen American democracy in the process.

Evidence of the Civic Empowerment Gap

The civic empowerment gap is perhaps most visible in election data. Despite enthusiasm about the power of Latinos in the 2012 presidential election and the increase in Black and youth turnout in 2008, voting rates exhibit huge and stubborn disparities. In 2010, the most recent election for which we have demographic data, Black and White U.S. citizens ages 18-29 were 40-50% more likely to vote than their Hispanic and Asian peers. (Note that all of these data are about citizens, so immigration status is not a factor.) Young people with some college experience, furthermore, were more than twice as likely to have voted as those with no college experience. These patterns exactly replicate those of older adults, where again Black and White, middle-class and college-educated citizens outvote Hispanic and Asian, poor and non-college attenders by up to a 2.5:1 margin. The fact that these were mid-term elections does not seem to have been a factor: Voting rates in the 2008 and 2004 presidential elections betrayed identical patterns (U.S. Census Bureau 2010, Table 4b).

Reliable analyses of political participation, as measured by membership in political parties, campaign donations, campaign volunteering, par-

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The increasing interest in school diversity in places like New York City is driven by historic demographic shifts in cities and suburbs and by a growing awareness that the United States will be majority minority within the next 30 years. Although they will not lead the movement, charter schools that value integration over isolated “diversity” can play a supporting role by collaborating with public schools that share the same goal. □

(CIVIC RIGHT: Cont. from page 2)

ticipation in protests, contacting an elected official and so forth, also show vast disparities linked with class, education and race. Middle-class adults are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of low-income adults, whether measured by working for a campaign, serving on the board of an organization, participating in protests, or contacting officials. Broader measures of civic participation—belonging to any group or organization, working on a community problem, volunteering, attending a community meeting, or even just wearing a campaign button or putting a political bumper sticker on one’s car—are also highly unequally distributed by educational attainment and ethnoracial group. For example, college graduates in 2009 reported participating in non-electoral political activities, volunteering with an organization, and working with neighbors to fix a community problem at twice the rate of high school graduates, and four times the rate of high school dropouts. White and multiracial individuals are similarly involved in these activities at twice the rates of Latino and Asian individuals, with African Americans in the middle (Levinson 2012). None of these rates of involvement is particularly high. Since power distributions follow comparative rather than absolute levels of participation, however, these general and persistent inequalities matter even when absolute levels of engagement are low for all groups.

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Furthermore, the sizable gap in individuals’ sense of *efficacy*—their beliefs that they themselves can make a difference and influence others, including those in government—is a major concern. The less efficacious one feels, the less likely one is to partici-

The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is.

pate. Efficacy is also significantly correlated with both race/ethnicity and class (Verba et al. 1995, Table 12.14). This gap is understandable. As a White, well-educated, middle-class woman with extensive political and social capital, for example, I undeniably *do* have more opportunities to influence government or public policy than did my non-White, educationally underserved, economically disadvantaged, often limited English proficient students living in neighborhoods with limited social and political capital (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Bartels 2008). But the efficacy gap is also viciously self-reinforcing, if those who correctly view themselves as more able to make a difference get ever more involved, while those who question their efficacy withdraw from public civic engagement. Similar concerns beset disparities in civic identity and civic duty, which figure importantly in in-

fluencing the character and quality of civic engagement (Kinder 1998).

Why the Civic Empowerment Gap Matters

Although these civic empowerment gaps are common knowledge, they tend to be explained away in the same way the academic achievement gap was a decade ago: “But of course poor people [or Hispanics, etc.] participate less. They don’t have the time or financial resources (or education, knowledge, ...) to participate as wealthier people do.” Such arguments are as inimical to democracy as were those arguments justifying the academic achievement gap. They also make little sense when examined on a global scale. Consider the millions of courageous protesters, many from distinctly lower-class communities, who have participated in the “Arab Spring” uprisings. Or examine voter turn-out rates internationally, which reveal about a 10 percentage point difference between the most- and least-educated citizens and between the wealthiest and poorest citizens. This is far eclipsed by the United States’ 25-35 percentage point gap (Lijphart 1997, 3; Jaime-Castillo 2009). It is also important to recognize that the participation gap has not even always been a major feature of U.S. civic and political life. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, immigrant incorporation groups, trade unions, fraternal organizations, and

political parties regularly mobilized poor, working-class, non-White and newly immigrant Americans, and participation in civic organizations especially was extremely widespread (Montgomery 1993, 2001; Skocpol 1999; Skocpol, et al. 2000).

The civic empowerment gap is therefore no more natural or inevitable than the academic achievement gap is. Virtually all Americans now accept (in theory, at least) that we have a national responsibility to provide adequate academic education to all children, and we claim (in theory, at least) that all children can achieve academically. We must reach the same conclusions about our nation's, and hence every school's, obligation to help all children achieve civic empowerment. Public schools were founded in the United States for civic purposes. We must hold schools to account—and hold *ourselves* to account—for achieving civic outcomes for all children that are as high quality as the academic outcomes we now claim to expect.

Democratic governance relies on participatory citizens for its legitimacy and stability. Furthermore, democratic deliberations and decisions are likely to be of lower quality if people representing only a fairly narrow range of experiences, interests and backgrounds are involved. Part of the beauty of democracy, when it functions effectively and inclusively, is its ability to create aggregate wisdom and good judgment from individual citizens' necessarily limited knowledge, skills and viewpoints. To exclude citizens from this process is to diminish the wisdom that the collectivity may create.

What Should Be Done

One important battleground for attacking the civic empowerment gap is the network of mostly urban schools serving a *de facto* segregated, poor and minority student population. To start with, we need to commit to improving urban schools and reducing the dropout rate, which reaches nearly fifty percent in some urban districts. If urban schools were better, and if more stu-

dents stayed in higher-quality schools and graduated, then the demographic divide in this country would narrow, and the civic empowerment gap would narrow along with it.

We also need to restore civic education to the curriculum. The decline in the number, range and frequency of civics courses offered in US elementary and high schools must be reversed. There is ample evidence that civic education improves civic outcomes, but resources devoted to it have dropped markedly over the past thirty or forty years—especially in schools serving minority students. This approach makes no sense. Consider that we require students to take English and math every semester of every year of elementary and secondary school because mastery takes time and practice. If we want students to become masterful citizens, then the same expectations should apply. Civic education must begin in elementary schools and be a regular part of edu-

cation K-12 and beyond.

Old-school “civics,” however, isn't going to shrink the civic empowerment gap on its own. Civics is usually taken to cover the three branches of government, “how a bill becomes a law,” and other formal institutional structures demonstrating how government works. Many students and others at the “bottom” of the civic empowerment gap, however, think that government *doesn't* work—at least for them or anyone they know—and they may well be justified in this belief. Civics classes that emphasize the mechanisms of a functional and essentially fair and democratic system will thus be rejected as irrelevant or worse by those to whom educators are most responsible for helping to empower. So we need to take another approach. *Schools need to take seriously the knowledge and experiences of low-income youth and adults of color—to teach in ways that are con-*

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Reader Comment

It was refreshing to see the essay by LeeAnn Hall and Danny HoSang in the March/April issue of *Poverty & Race*. The tradition promoted by Saul Alinsky feeds into and builds on a deeply imbedded cultural/political pragmatism in North America. Too many community movements mimic the deal-making that characterizes the bankrupt system of planning and decisionmaking when they start out by limiting their objectives to the realisable short-term deal with a developer or government body. It leads to the constant lowering of expectations. In principle, there's nothing wrong with making deals or concessions, but when such tactics become strategies, they leave communities without strategies. Narrow, pragmatic organizing that explicitly evades discussion and debate about fundamental issues of class and race casts a shadow over those who are organizing for deeper changes. Community organizers who go for deeper change beyond the token community benefits thrown around by deep-pocketed developers and dealing politicians are automatically dismissed as utopians and dreamers or, worse, too radical to engage in dialogue. Here in New York, a well-worn phrase I hear from politicians and activists across the political spectrum is “I agree with you but it ain't gonna happen,” which really means they won't even talk about anything but cutting a deal. Occupy Wall Street struck a deep chord in U.S. society because it tapped in to a well of dissatisfaction with the bankrupt system—monopoly capitalism—in which everything has a price and the next deal is around the corner.

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sonant with and that even build upon their knowledge and experience—while doing so in a way that is engaging and empowering rather than disaffecting and disempowering.

One important way to do this is by teaching historical counternarratives instead of the moderately triumphalist narrative about U.S. history taught in most schools. Students are often exhorted to “get involved” because of how great the country is and how pure are its ideals. Instead, students can learn about the collective struggles that millions of Americans have engaged in to create opportunities for others. It then becomes students’ obligation to take on this mantle of struggle in order to consolidate these hard-won gains and to open further opportunities to others. This kind of teaching requires a shift from extraordinary heroes, whether Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, to ordinary role models. To the extent that students learn to gaze upon others’ heroic visages, they fail to learn and be moved to engage civically themselves. Education for civic empowerment necessitates a shift in focus from distant heroes and their accomplishments to more ordinary role models and their specific techniques of civic engagement, especially of collective action.

At the same time as we change how students learn about citizenship in settings such as history class, we must also change students’ opportunities to learn through citizenship in the school as a whole. Schools are themselves civil societies, for good and ill; as such, they exert a profound effect on students’ and adults’ civic experiences, identities and opportunities—even when they have no intention of doing so. If we want young people to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits of empowered citizens, they must be given the opportunity on a regular basis to practice being citizens. Such opportunities are shockingly rare especially in urban schools serving predominantly low-income students of color. Civic disrespect, compelled silence and zero tolerance policies for

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any perceived deviance are often the order of the day. But classrooms and schools can be reformed, so that an open, mutually respectful culture and climate is established in which students feel not only free but even expected to speak up and share their perspectives on important matters affecting the

school, local, regional and even global community.

Perhaps most importantly, adults, other elites and youth themselves will come to recognize and value the civic contributions that young people—especially low-income youth of color—can make only when these young people

are given the opportunities to make a visible and effective difference in the world beyond the school. "Action civics" enables students to do civics and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action. Organizations around the country are partnering with urban schools and districts to provide students such opportunities, including Mikva Challenge, Public Achievement, Generation Citizen, Youth on Board, and Earth Force. These initiatives are also supported by the National Action Civics Collaborative, which is beginning to train additional teachers, policy makers, and district leaders in action civics.

Moving Forward

Public schools have always been charged with the responsibility of making Americans, and hence, of (re)making America. The decisions we make about how to educate our and

others' children are at their heart decisions about how we conceive of the world we live in now and how to create the world we want to inhabit in the future. I argue that solving the civic empowerment gap is a central responsibility of schools (and other public institutions); it is a necessary precondition of our claim to be a democratic nation. But the task is not without danger. It risks exposing fissures in our national identity and democracy that many people would rather keep under wraps. It also risks upending our collective understanding of who we are, both empirically and aspirationally—including by revealing that no such collective understanding exists. We must confront these risks clear-headedly and honestly if schools are truly to tackle the civic empowerment gap in a meaningful way.

Notwithstanding both the challenges and even the dangers, the pursuit of democratic equality and legitimacy is a laudable and necessary goal. As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students and teachers with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their

efficacy and engagement, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities and the nation as a whole, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults.

Reducing the civic empowerment gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government's representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals that all schools—and all citizens—can and should embrace. □

(MINDFULNESS: Cont. from page 7)

It would need more of a data/science explanation front-ended and may be a longer process to build buy-in in the group.

Kat: I'm a yoga and meditation practitioner. And, even for me, initially, there was a little of me that felt a little angry for the sake of being resistant. [laughing] I'm not sure why that came out of me. I was frustrated perhaps that a lot of the stuff in [the social context of education class] was an overlap from undergrad and there wasn't any time to focus on what do we do with that. So I thought, alright! Here's a literacy course, here we go with methods. And then, oh my gosh, here we go again with schools and society and racism. But then, with the practices of meditation and truly listening, we started to articulate voices of dissensions, democratic discourse,

and it wasn't combative for the sake of it, but deepening the conversations. I could see the transformation in myself from one extreme to the other. There was something in the process of community-building that was transformative.

Dan: We came in looking for something very specific. We came out with teflon minds, able to let the distractions of separation slide off of us.

The way forward is both together and mindful.

Although it was not in the explicit design, the practices of meditation and being intentional with each other started to chip away at one of the core requirements of an oppressive society: that we are separate and in competition with each other. The Donovan cohort and all of the authors of this article represent a variety of standpoints in society: young adult, middle-

aged, white, people of color, varying sexual identities, varying abled, etc. What the method of being mindful afforded us was a chance to touch stone to our core humanity, to be in our bodies and to be present so that we could engage more wholeheartedly in our collective learning. We also share these practices with some trepidation, particularly to the field of education, which knows how to homogenize and flatten almost any vibrant practice. In a sense, schools come by this honestly, as they are modeled after factories. In the desire to "scale up," though, we have to remain vigilant about not reducing and removing the human element to teaching. At its core, teaching and learning as well as social movements are relational activities. Perhaps the only proven method for being in a generative relationship for the social good is to be mindfully human and humanizing. □